United States Department of Agriculture | Forest Service | Nez Perce-Clearwater NFs
Moose Creek Ranger District | 831 Selway Road
Kooskia, ID 83539
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File Code: 1950
Date: Dec 30, 2013

Dear Planning Participant:

This document describes a proposed project – Middle Fork Vegetation Management – on the Moose Creek Ranger District, Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest. I welcome your comments and suggestions.

Overview

The Moose Creek District is considering project activities that include commercial timber harvest, application of prescribed fire, culvert replacements and road decommissioning within the Middle Fork project area in order to increase the representation of young forest and early successional habitats; trend tree species composition towards more resilient species and reduce road related impacts to the watershed and protect aquatic species in the area.

Activities that are being considered would be consistent with the Forest Plan goals listed on pages II-1 and II-2 of the Nez Perce Forest Plan.

Location

The project area is in Idaho County, Idaho and encompasses the 13,576 acres of National Forest Lands within the Middle Fork Clearwater watershed. This area is on the south side of the Middle Fork Clearwater River and extends from the Forest boundary (approximately 2.5 miles southwest of the community of Syringa) upstream to the community of Lowell. Please see attached maps for Legal descriptions. The river corridor in this area is classified as a "recreation" segment of the Middle Fork Clearwater Wild and Scenic River System.

Current Conditions

The Middle Fork Project Area has a high proportion of grand fir and Douglas-fir timber stand types that are susceptible to disease and insect attacks. Extensive silvicultural diagnoses conducted in 2012 indicate that root diseases and bark beetles are currently affecting many stands to a high degree, and these agents will continue to prevent many mature stands (80 to 110 years of age) from attaining an old-growth structure due to ongoing and expanding mortality. A follow-up reconnaissance flight in 2013 confirmed that mortality, particularly from Douglas-fir beetle, is continuing to expand.

Grand fir and Douglas-fir stands have encroached on the desirable large overstory ponderosa pine in the area. The current fuel loadings, steep slopes and continuous canopy would support development of large scale crown fire even in an average year. Such a fire could damage desirable resources and threaten

private inholdings as well as the communities of Lowell and Syringa. Fires driven by extremes in climate, as experienced over the last decade would be expected to be even more damaging and threatening.

A roads analysis conducted in 2012 identified approximately 2-3 miles of roads that are no longer needed for future management or poorly located and potentially contributing to watershed degradation.

Purpose and Need for the Proposal

The objective of the Middle Fork Project is to move the area towards a more diverse and resilient landscape structure by creating a range of age and size classes that more closely emulates a mixed-severity fire regime. Also, the desired species composition would be moved more towards the early-seral species (ponderosa pine, western larch, and white pine) by retaining these species in variable retention harvesting and by planting post-harvest, which would improve resilience to root diseases, bark beetles, fire and a changing climate over the long-term.

Watershed improvement activities would reduce road related impacts to the watershed and important aquatic habitats while still providing a stable and cost efficient transportation system and dispersed recreation opportunities.

Vegetation Management
Purpose: Trend vegetation species composition, structure, and distributions toward desired conditions described in the Forest Plan. (Forest Plan page II-1)

Need: The project area has a high proportion of grand fir/Douglas fir cover types. These species tend to be more susceptible / vulnerable to insects and diseases and grand fir is unlikely to survive in wildfire. There is a need to trend the area towards a more diverse and resilient forest structure by creating a range of age classes, size classes, species diversity and disturbance patterns that more closely emulate natural mixed severity disturbance. Shifting tree species composition by retaining and planting early seral species (i.e. ponderosa pine, western larch and western white pine) in managed areas would help trend the area toward or maintain desired habitat conditions and would make these habitats more resistant and resilient to change agents such as insect, disease, and fire.

Goods and Service
Purpose: To utilize timber outputs produced through forest management activities to support the economic structure of local communities. (Forest Plan page II-1)

Need: The need to provide a sustained yield of resource outputs is directed in the Forest Plan. Much of the area consists of grand fir dominated stands that have insect and disease infestations that are contributing to increased tree mortality, or are at risk from stand replacing events. Stands proposed for treatment are currently losing volume and value due to insects and disease. Harvest of the timber would provide materials to local industries.

Fire Regime/Natural Disturbance Restoration and Fuel Reduction

Purpose: Break up fuel continuity created by past wildfires which would reduce the potential for large scale crown fires. Reduce shade tolerant ladder fuels around existing legacy trees to retain those more

fire resistant legacy trees on the landscape over the long term. These activities would emulate mixed severity fire. (Forest Plan page II – 2)

Need: Effective fire suppression in this area has created a vegetative shift to less fire resistant species, and an increase in ladder fuels that can contribute to the risk of high intensity and potentially resource damaging wildfire. Past harvest patterns do not emulate natural disturbance patterns nor do they emulate natural habitat structure. There is a need to increase patch sizes to shift age and size class distributions to increase high quality early seral wildlife habitats. Landscape burning and timber harvest that mimics natural fire would help increase forest resilience, help reduce risk of wildfires, and help create high quality habitats that would benefit birds, small mammals, and big game species. Fire dependent wildlife species would benefit from landscape burning.

Watershed Improvement

Purpose: Reduce potential sediment inputs into the aquatic ecosystem.

Need: Sediment input from gravel and native surface roads can flow into streams, negatively affecting fish habitat and water quality. Improvement of watershed function and stream conditions can be accomplished by reducing road densities and repairing existing roads and culverts to reduce sediment and improve drainage. Decompacting soils and adding organic material on old skid trails and landings can also help to improve watershed function.

Preliminary Proposal

Proposed management activities are located in management area (MA) 12 which emphasizes timber production and other multiple uses on a sustained yield basis and MA 16 which emphasizes improvements to deer and elk winter range and MA 17 which emphasizes timber production on a sustained yield basis while meeting visual quality objectives.

Proposed Actions

The actions proposed by the Forest Service to meet the purpose and need are briefly described below.

Improve forest health, provide goods and services, reduce fuels and improve wildlife habitat

- Conduct "variable retention" regeneration harvest and post-harvest burning activities on up to 2300 acres distributed across the focus areas to create early sucessional plant communities and improve wildlife habitat while re-establishing long-lived early seral tree species. Variable retention harvest would include areas of full retention (clumps), irregular edges, and retention of snags and legacy trees to provide structure and a future source of woody debris. Openings would likely exceed 40 acres. Creation of openings over 40 acres requires 60 day public review and Regional Forest approval. This letter provides public notice that an environmental impact statement will be prepared and Regional Forester approval requested.
- Apply improvement harvest (thin from below) on approximately 875 acres to remove encroachment and ladder fuels from ponderosa pine dominated stands.
- Construct up to 18 miles of temporary roads to carry out the proposed action. Roads would be designed and located to minimize environmental effects and decommissioned after use.
- Harvest would be conducted by ground based (tractor/skyline) and aerial (helicopter) logging systems. Logs would likely be landed in the Wild and Scenic River corridor at designated helicopter landings.

- Create a shaded fuel break and defensible space for approximately 300 feet on NFS lands adjacent to private properties within the project area. This may include commercial and non-commercial thinning, pruning of ladder fuels and hand piling of slash.

Watershed Improvement

- Maintenance and improvement of 7-10 miles of existing roads used to implement the proposed actions. Maintenance or improvement may include culvert installation or replacement, ditch cleaning, and riprap placement for drainage improvement. It may also include gravel placement, road grading and dust abatement.
- 2-3 miles of system roads no longer considered necessary for transportation needs would be decommissioned.

Request for Public Scoping Comments

I recognize the many interests and concerns the public has regarding management on National Forest lands and this is why I am requesting your comments concerning the Middle Fork project proposal.

To assure your written comments are fully considered during the analysis of this project, please submit your comments within 30 days of the publication of the notice in the Federal Register. Comments submitted after that date will be accepted, but our ability to respond effectively could be reduced.

Comments may be submitted in writing, orally, or through electronic means. Those who respond to this invitation for comments will be notified when the Draft Environmental Impact Statement is available for a forty-five day public comment period.

Please address written comments to: Joe Hudson, Moose Creek District Ranger, 831 Selway Road, Kooskia, ID 83539.

Electronic comments may be submitted to comments-northern-nezperce-moose-creek@fs.fed.us. The subject line must contain the name of the project for which you are submitting comments (i.e. Middle Fork Project). Acceptable formats are MS Word, Word Perfect, PDF or RTF. When commenting, please include the following: (1) your name, address, and (if possible) your telephone number, and organization represented, (if any); (2) title of the document on which you are submitting comments (Middle Fork); (3) specific facts and related rationale concerning this project that you feel should be considered.

Comments received in response to this scoping request, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection.

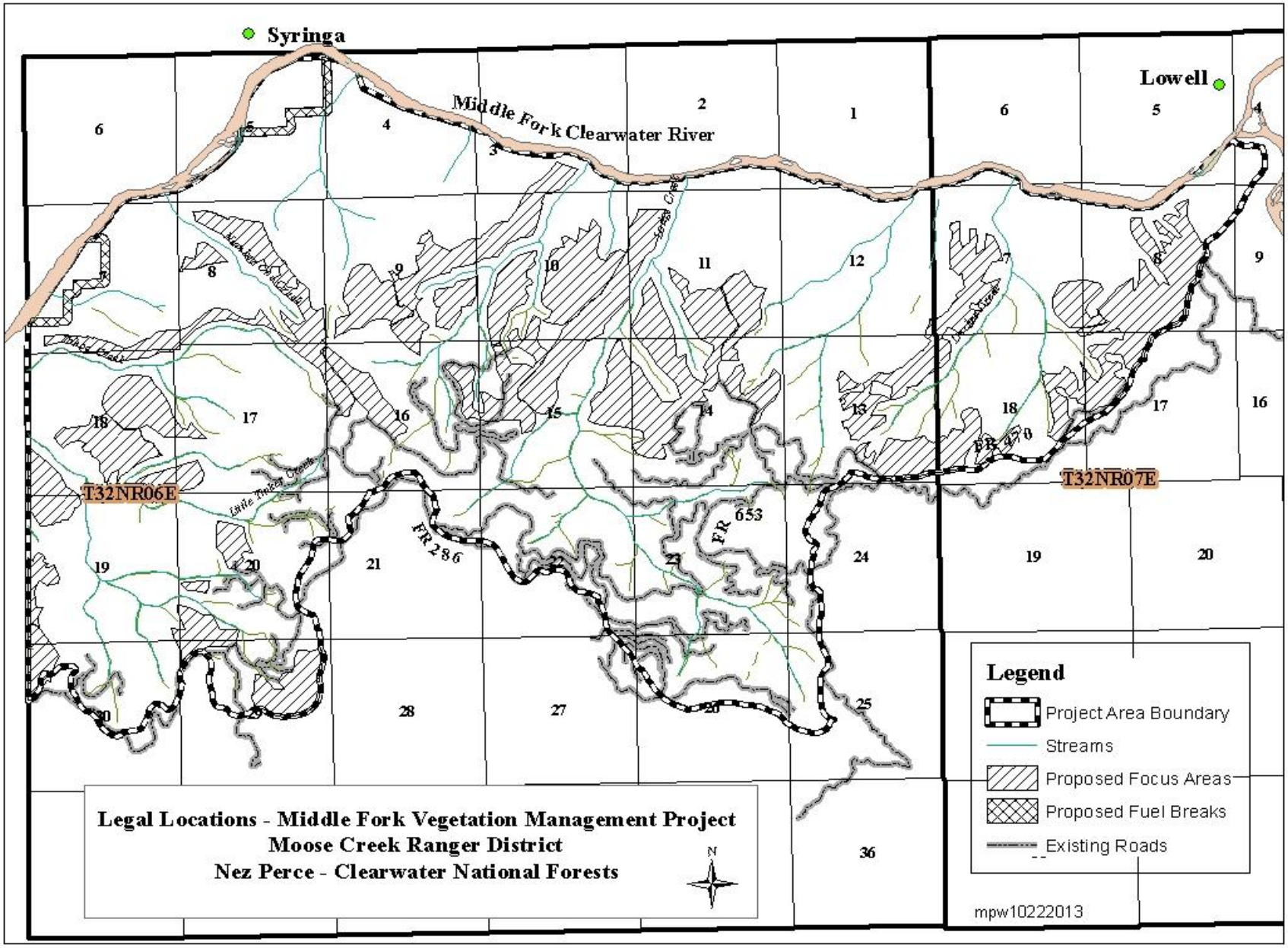
Should you have questions or need further information, please contact Mike Ward, Interdisciplinary Team Leader, at the Kooskia Ranger Station (208-926-6413). Thank you for your interest in this project.

Sincerely,

/s/ Craig Trulock

Craig Trulock
Acting Deputy Forest Supervisor

Enclosure: map


Syringa
Lowell
Middle Fork Clearwater River
T32NR06E
T32NR07E
FR 286
FR 653
FR 470
Legend
Project Area Boundary
Streams
Proposed Focus Areas
Proposed Fuel Breaks
Existing Roads
mpw10222013
Legal Locations - Middle Fork Vegetation Management Project
Moose Creek Ranger District
Nez Perce - Clearwater National Forests
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